

SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY

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NEWS RELEASE

August 29, 1968
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DR. STANLEY G. FRENCH OF SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS UNIVERSITY
TO SPEAK TO THE XIVth INTERNATIONAL CONGRESS OF PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Stanley G. French, Professor of Philosophy at Sir George Williams University, has been invited to speak to the XIVth International Congress of Philosophy, in Vienna, on Tuesday, September 3, at 9:30 a.m.

The subject of Dr. French's talk is "Suicide and The Categorical Imperative".

The XIVth International Congress of Philosophy takes place in Vienna, from September 2 to September 9. Thousands of philosophers from all over the world are expected to attend. English, French and German are the official languages of the Congress. Talks will be simultaneously translated.

Dr. French joined the Department of Philosophy on July 1. Prior to this, he was a member of the Department of Philosophy at the University of Western Ontario. Dr. French resigned as Chairman of the Board of Education for the City of London when he moved to Sir George Williams University.

At the completion of the Congress, Dr. French will travel to Russia to meet with philosophers there, before returning to Montreal.

From the office of: Malcolm Stone,
Information Officer.

NOTE: Please find enclosed a copy of Dr. French's talk plus a short summary.

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NEWS RELEASE

Le 29 août 1968
POUR PUBLICATION IMMEDIATE

LE DOCTEUR STANLEY G. FRENCH, PROFESSEUR A L'UNIVERSITE SIR GEORGE WILLIAMS, ADRESSERA LA PAROLE AU XIVIÈME CONGRES INTERNATIONAL DE PHILOSOPHIE

Le Docteur Stanley G. French, professeur de philosophie à l'Université Sir George Williams, adressera la parole au XIVIème Congrès International de Philosophie, à Vienne, jeudi le 3 septembre à 9:30 a.m.

Le Docteur French présentera un texte intitulé: "Suicide and The Categorical Imperative".

Ce XIVIème Congrès International de Philosophie aura lieu à Vienne du 2 au 9 septembre. Des milliers de philosophes de par le monde y seront présents. L'Anglais, le Français et l'Allemand sont les langues officielles du Congrès et les discours seront traduits simultanément.

Le Docteur French s'est joint au département de philosophie à l'Université Sir George Williams le 1er juillet dernier. Antérieurement, il était membre du département de philosophie à l'Université Western en Ontario.

Après le Congrès et avant de revenir à Montréal, le Docteur French se rendra en Russie pour y rencontrer plusieurs philosophes.

Du bureau de Malcolm Stone,
Directeur de l'Information

NOTE: Ci-joint, copie de l'allocution du Docteur French et un court résumé.

SUICIDE AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

A Summary

In my attempts to be morally responsible, one of the criteria that I employ frequently is the categorical imperative. One of my many conscious assumptions is that the categorical imperative is a useful tool. In thinking through a moral problem, any approach is useful when it allows the agent to see a further aspect of his situation. When I say that I employ the categorical imperative, I do not mean that I do so in the same manner as Kant, nor do I even attempt, except accidentally, to see what conclusion Kant himself might have reached.

If I understand Kant correctly, he would say that there is only the one universal and necessary weltanschauung and that, regardless of the appropriate maxim, certain forms of human behavior will turn out in the end to be either always morally right or always morally wrong. Suicide, for example, is always wrong. I, on the contrary, wish to hold that in the employment of the categorical imperative, the decisions one reaches are contingent upon the maxims one chooses, and on the weltanschauung that one happens to have worked out at any given moment.

So far as I am aware, Kant did not provide us with any criterion that would rule out more detailed maxims than he himself gave us as examples. Any description of my reasons for wanting to act in a certain way would, I believe, qualify as a maxim. Thus, one could say: because I am a young man with a young wife and four small children, because I have terminal cancer, because my prolonged illness is

causing my wife and children economic and psychological hardships that will persist long after my natural death, because I wish to die with my self-respect intact, and in spite of the fact that modern drugs guarantee that I shall suffer a minimum of pain--for all of these reasons, most of them altruistic, "I make it my principle to shorten my life."

Here is a maxim that spells out in detail the reasons why I intend to commit suicide. There is no reason, indeed, why the maxim could not be a good deal more detailed. When I apply the categorical imperative to this maxim, my answer is that I could quite happily will this maxim to become a universal law. I should be perfectly willing to allow any man dying of terminal cancer whose prolonged illness is causing his young wife and children long-run economic and psychological hardships, who wishes to die with a positive self concept, and who is not bothered by pain, to take his own life.

Kant would no doubt take each one of the above reasons--any reason--and argue, by reference to his view of divine Providence and the laws of nature, that suicide cannot be justified, that the reasons given, whatever they are, lead to some sort of contradiction. "Suicide is in no circumstances permissible." "Suicide is not inadmissible and abominable because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it because it is abominable in that it degrades man's inner worth below that of the animal creation."

I think that one cannot ever say with complete assurance, from one's armchair, what one will do or think under certain not yet personally experienced circumstances. In spite of this reservation, I am quite confident that there are circumstances under which I would

be willing to choose suicide, and I would feel that I had made a responsible decision. I would commit suicide rather than contribute to genocide, given that these were the only two courses open to me. I would commit suicide rather than cause long-run economic and psychological hardships for my wife and family. In willing either of these embryonic maxims to become a universal law, no contradiction would arise, given my own peculiar weltanschauung.

Nature will not come to an end simply by virtue of the fact that the moths and the cockroaches derive differing moral conclusions from their use of the categorical imperative.

Stanley G. French,

Sir George Williams University.

SUICIDE AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

Stanley G. French

Sir George Williams University.

SUICIDE AND THE CATEGORICAL IMPERATIVE

There are no a priori values. When acting as a moral agent or judge, this philosophical conviction is always uppermost in my thinking. For whatever reason, I have reacted to this discovery in a way more appropriate to Dr. Rieux than Meursault. In other words, I continue to want to be responsible, and I am responsible, even though, in a sense, I am responsible only to myself.

The man on the street believes that there are a priori values. He believes that there is one true system for moral guidance—Christianity, for example, or even utilitarianism—and he sees himself as adhering to this system with varying degrees of success. To the extent that he fails on any given occasion, to that extent he is a sinner.

In fact, of course, the man on the street seldom manages to remain within his system. In some contexts he is utilitarian, in others a hedonist, or a conformist, or a Christian. Unwittingly, he flits from one moral criterion to another, believing all the while that he is acting in a manner consistent with the one true doctrine. The traditional moral philosopher and the priest, though for somewhat different reasons, find this sort of behavior very upsetting.

As one who wishes to remain responsible in spite of the fact that there are no a priori values, my practice shares a certain affinity with that of the man on the street. What he does unconsciously and in a limited way, I do consciously and somewhat more thoroughly. When faced with having to make a moral decision, I think the situation through as a utilitarian; then I think it through as a hedonist,

a conformist, a pragmatist, and in any other way that I feel at the time might be somehow appropriate. In the end, events force me to come to a decision, and I choose whatever course of action seems to me at the moment to be more reasonable.

In my attempts to be morally responsible, one of the criteria that I employ frequently is the categorical imperative. One of my many conscious assumptions is that the categorical imperative is a useful tool. In thinking through a moral problem, any approach is useful when it allows the agent to see a further aspect of his situation. When I say that I employ the categorical imperative, it should be obvious that I do not do so in the same manner as Kant, nor do I even attempt, except accidentally, to see what conclusion Kant himself might have reached.

If I understand Kant correctly, he would say that there is only the one universal and necessary weltanschauung and that, regardless of the appropriate maxim, certain forms of human behavior will turn out in the end to be either always morally right or always morally wrong. Suicide, for example, is always wrong. I, on the contrary, wish to hold that in the employment of the categorical imperative, the decisions one reaches are contingent upon the maxims one chooses, and on the weltanschauung that one happens to have worked out at any given moment.

According to Kant, it is a duty to preserve one's life; and moreover, everyone has an inclination to do so. Most people, however, in preserving their lives, act in accordance with the duty they have, but they do so because of the inclination, and not, as they should,

because of the duty. Kant provides us with a, to him, typical test case: if adversities and sorrow have completely removed your relish for life; if you wish for death, and yet continue to preserve your life; and if you do this "from neither inclination nor fear but from¹ duty"; then your stance has moral value.

The formula with which Kant provides us is the categorical imperative: "Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law" or, somewhat more clearly, "Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature."²

In order to apply this formula in a way consistent with Kant, one of the many things one must know is the way in which Kant employs the term 'maxim'. He defines it as "the subjective principle of acting." It "contains the practical rule which reason determines according to the conditions of the subject (often its ignorance or inclinations) and is thus the principle according to which the subject acts."³ A maxim is a statement which applies to you as an individual subject or moral agent, and it states the principle on which you choose to act,

The maxim may state explicitly the agent's motive, or it may not; but in any case it is more general than a mere statement of motive. The maxim generalizes my action, including my reason or reasons for acting. Kant's examples are: "For love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction"; "When I believe myself to be in need of money, I will borrow money and promise to repay it,

although I know I shall never do so"; "I find myself in comfortable circumstances, and prefer indulgence in pleasure to troubling myself with broadening and improving my natural gifts"; "Let each human be as happy as heaven wills, or as he can make himself; I will not take anything from him, or even envy him; but to his welfare or to his assistance in time of need, I have no desire to contribute,"⁴

Suicide. Kant asks, "Could you act as though the maxim of your action--for love of myself, I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction--were by your will to become a universal law of nature?" Kant expects that everyone would answer in the negative. According to Kant, the feeling of self-love exists in man for the purpose of improving life. Hence, it would be a contradiction to universalize a maxim which referred to the feeling of self-love as justification for destroying life.

Amongst the premisses that appear to be present in this argument, we have (a) there is a divine Providence; (b) each person has been equipped by divine Providence with self-love; and (c) divine Providence has established a teleology in nature such that, in each man, the feeling of self-love exists solely in order to preserve or improve life. Few contemporary philosophers, including this writer, would accept these premisses.

The point I am trying to make here is that one's employment of the categorical imperative is contingent upon one's weltanschauung. Kant, of course, thought that there is only one universal and neces-

sary weltanschauung. We have to thank Kant for making us see that people do have and even, to some extent, share weltanschauungen--like Wittgenstein's spiderweb; but it is now abundantly clear that there is no one universal and necessary world-view.

The weltanschauung is one variable in the application of the categorical imperative. The maxim is another. The combination of circumstances, self-love plus an excess of evil over satisfaction, is by no means the only possible set of circumstances that have led people to contemplate the act of suicide.⁵ Durkheim distinguishes dozens of factors that might lead to suicide. He writes of the social causes of suicide, and of the extra-social, e.g. psychopathic states. Amongst the social causes of suicide, Durkheim describes the egoistic, the altruistic and the anomic. As Durkheim points out, there have been societies where suicide is called for on certain religious grounds, e.g., the suicide of men on the threshold of old age or stricken with sickness, or of a woman on her husband's death, and of followers or servants on the death of their chiefs. "When a person kills himself, in all these cases, it is not because he assumes the right to do so but, on the contrary, because it is his duty."⁶

Such a person might have as his maxim, for love of others (my dead chief, my dead husband, Shiva, God) I make it my principle to shorten my life when by a longer duration it threatens more evil than satisfaction, in that I shall always feel that I have been remiss in my duty. While neither Kant nor I would wish to see this maxim become a universal law, there is no question that many good and wise

people have seen the matter otherwise.

So far as I am aware, Kant did not provide us with any criterion that would rule out more detailed maxims than he himself gave us as examples. Any description of my reasons for wanting to act in a certain way would, I believe, qualify as a maxim. Thus, one could say, because I am a young man with a young wife and four small children, because I have terminal cancer, because my prolonged illness is causing my wife and children economic and psychological hardships that will persist long after my natural death, because I wish to die with my self-respect intact, and in spite of the fact that modern drugs guarantee that I shall suffer a minimum of pain--for all of these reasons, most of them altruistic, "I make it my principle to shorten my life".

Here is a maxim that spells out in detail the reasons why I intend to commit suicide. There is no reason, indeed, why the maxim could not be a good deal more detailed. When I apply the categorical imperative to this maxim, my answer is that I could quite happily will this maxim to become a universal law. I should be perfectly willing to allow any man dying of terminal cancer whose prolonged illness is causing his young wife and children long-run economic and psychological hardships, who wishes to die with a positive self concept, and who is not bothered by pain, to take his own life.

Kant would no doubt take each one of the above reasons--any reason--and argue, by reference to his view of divine Providence and the laws of nature, that suicide cannot be justified, that the reasons given, whatever they are, lead to some sort of contradiction.

"Suicide is in no circumstances permissible." "Suicide is not

inadmissible and abominable because God has forbidden it; God has forbidden it because it is abominable in that it degrades man's inner worth below that of the animal creation."

Sartre, with a wholly different weltanschauung, and a different maxim, permits suicide. "Indeed, everything is permissible since God does not exist." Sartre argues that "a community event which suddenly burst forth and involves me in it does not come from the outside. If I am mobilized in a war, this war is my war; it is in my image and I deserve it. I deserve it first because I could always get out of it by suicide or by desertion; these ultimate possibilities are those which must always be present for us when there is a question envisaging a situation. For lack of getting out of it, I have chosen it. This can be due to inertia, to cowardice in the face of public opinion, or because I prefer certain other values to the value of the refusal to join in the war (the good opinion of my relatives, the honour of my family, etc.)."

Thus, Sartre's maxim might be: because I am not a coward in the face of public opinion, because I do not value the good opinion of my relatives or the honor of my family above the consequences of war, I choose to commit suicide rather than be mobilized. And Sartre, with his weltanschauung, could, it may be presumed, will this maxim to become a universal law.

It is not by chance that I make reference to Sartre in the context of this paper. For Sartre, in the passage referred to above, reiterates his view that "man being condemned to be free carries the weight of the whole world on his shoulders; he is responsible for the world and for himself." In order to understand part at least of what

Sartre means when he says that each man is responsible for the world, it is necessary to recall certain passages in his Existentialism.

"In fact, in creating the man that we want to be, there is not a single one of our acts which does not at the same time create an image of man as we think he ought to be. . . . We can never choose evil. We always choose the good, and nothing can be good for us without being good for all." "If it is true that in facing a situation, for example, one in which, as a person capable of having sexual relations, of having children, I am obliged to choose an attitude, and if I in any way assume responsibility for a choice which, in involving myself, also involves all mankind, this has nothing to do with caprice, even if no a priori value determines my choice." ¹² Such passages as these make sense to me only by assuming that Sartre has adopted a modified extension of Kant's categorical imperative. In the former passage Sartre appears to be claiming that the moral agent necessarily acts in conformity with the categorical imperative. This extreme position is, I think, indefensible. But in the second passage and others like it Sartre seems to be saying that the moral agent can and should make use of the categorical imperative.

Sartre provides the reader with a revealing example. He contrasts ¹³ the behavior of Maggie Tulliver and Sanseverina. Maggie Tulliver is in love with a young man, Stephen, who is engaged to an insignificant young girl. Although Maggie is perfectly capable of taking Stephen away from his fiancée, she chooses to ignore her own happiness and, "in the name of human solidarity, to sacrifice herself and give up the man she loves." Sanseverina, on the other hand, "believing that

passion is man's true value, would say that a great love deserves sacrifices; that it is to be preferred to the banality of the conjugal love that would tie Stephen to the young ninny he had to marry. She would choose to sacrifice the girl and fulfill her happiness; and, as Stendhal shows, she is even ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of passion, if this life demands it."

Here, comments Sartre, we are faced with two strictly opposed moralities. Traditionally, one could now sit down and ask who is right, Maggie or Sanseverina? The premiss would be that, although it may be difficult, and although it may take a long time to discover it, there is an answer to this moral question. A likely further promise would be that, since their modes of behavior are inconsistent with each other, one of them must be right and the other wrong. Sartre's answer to this moral question is one which, in my experience, most people find upsetting. According to Sartre, the choices of Maggie Tulliver and Sanseverina are "much the same"; that is to say, in Sartre's view the actions of both are praiseworthy.

As long as one exercises one's freedom in a creative or inventive way, without basing one's choice on factual or logical errors, and having in mind that one is choosing for all mankind, then it is right to choose to seduce Stephen, and it is also right to choose not to seduce Stephen. What is wrong is to act in "bad faith", to regard oneself and/or others as an object or thing; that is, it is wrong to pretend that one is not free. To act in bad faith is to be a "coward". If one is a coward in this sense, then it does not matter whether one seduces Stephen or not, one is wrong regardless.

R.M. Hare is another contemporary philosopher who has opted to make use of the categorical imperative, though like Sartre without the Kantian weltanschauung. Hare claims that, in the end, one comes to this question: "Am I prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of this man or animal, and capable of having only the experiences, desires, etc., of him or it?"¹⁴ The way Hare works this out is as follows. One takes the proposed moral behavior and submits it to the process of universalization, in which there are two stages. The first stage is passed when we have found what Hare calls, with Kant, a maxim. This maxim shall be one from which, given the facts of our particular situation, the moral judgment which we want to make follows. For Sanseverina, such a maxim would be: "It is all right to sacrifice the banality of conjugal love in favour of the happiness to be derived from the satisfaction of a great love."

The second stage in the process of universalization--and the more important stage, according to Hare--is that the person who produces the maxim should actually hold it. That is, "It is necessary, not merely to quote a maxim, but (in Kantian language) to will it to be a universal law . . . Willing it to be a universal law involves willing it to apply even when the roles played by the parties are reversed."¹⁵ Sanseverina must ask herself whether she would urge this maxim for all people; and more particularly, she must ask herself whether she would urge this maxim even if she were to change places with Stephen's insignificant young fiancée. Am I, Sanseverina, prepared to accept a maxim which would allow this to be done to me, were I in the position of Stephen's young ninny?

I do not know how Hare would answer this question on behalf of Sanseverina, but we do know that Sartre answers it in the affirmative. And Sartre believes that Sanseverina would have answered it in the affirmative ("She is even ready to sacrifice herself for the sake of passion, if this life demands it.") If I may speak for Hare, I do not see what grounds he would have for complaint if Sanseverina were to say, "Yes. I am so prepared."

At the age of sixteen, Bertrand Russell was sent to crammers' school in order to be prepared for the scholarship examination at Trinity College, Cambridge. During this period, Russell was, as he puts it, "profoundly unhappy. There was a footpath leading across fields to New Southgate, and I used to go there alone to watch the sunset and contemplate suicide. I did not, however, commit suicide, because I wished to know more of mathematics." Some twenty years later in his life, when he was experiencing difficulties both in his work and in his marriage, Russell apparently went through much the same pattern of experience. "At the time I often wondered whether I should ever come out at the other end of the tunnel in which I seemed to be. I used to stand on the foot-bridge at Kennington, near Oxford, watching the trains go by, and determining that tomorrow I would place myself under one of them. But when the morrow came I always found myself hoping that perhaps Principia Mathematica would be finished some day."

16

I myself have never seriously contemplated suicide. When an undergraduate, I published a poem modeled on the pattern poems of e.e. cummings.

why
do I
cling to life
when this knife
bequeaths
wreaths?

Several months after the publication of this poem, a woman approached me to inform me that she had shown the poem to her psychiatrist, and discussed it with him. His view, apparently, was that I should very shortly commit suicide.

The effect of this incident upon me has been to provide me with a continuing awareness of suicide as a curious human phenomenon. I think that one cannot ever say with complete assurance, from one's armchair, what one will do or think under certain not yet personally experienced circumstances. In spite of this reservation, I am quite confident that there are circumstances under which I would be willing to choose suicide, and I would feel that I had made a responsible decision. I would commit suicide rather than contribute to genocide, given that these were the only two courses open to me. I would commit suicide rather than cause long-run economic and psychological hardships for my wife and family. In willing either of these embryonic maxims to become a universal law, no contradiction would arise, given my own peculiar weltanschauung.

Nature will not come to an end simply by virtue of the fact that the moths and the cockroaches derive differing moral conclusions from their use of the categorical imperative.

Stanley G. French,

Sir George Williams University

FOOTNOTES

- 1
Kant, Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals. trans. L.W. Beck.
Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949. p. 59.
- 2
Kant, Foundations, p.80.
- 3
Kant, Foundations, p.80n.
- 4
Kant, Foundations, p.81f.
- 5
Kant seems to have been aware that self-love is not the only possible motive for suicide, although there is no indication of this in the Foundations. See Kant's Lectures on Ethics. trans. L. Infield, New York: Harper & Row, 1963. p.148ff.
- 6
Emile Durkheim, Suicide. trans. Spaulding and Simpson. New York: Free Press, 1951. p.219.
- 7
Kant, Lectures, p.151.
- 8
Kant, Lectures, p.154.
- 9
J.-P. Sartre. Existentialism and Human Emotions. trans. B. Frechtman. New York: Philosophical Library, 1957. p.22.
- 10
J.-P. Sartre. Being and Nothingness. trans. H.E. Barnes. New York: Philosophical Library, 1956. p.554.
- 11
Sartre, Being, p.553.
- 12
Sartre, Existentialism, p.17 and p.41 respectively.
- 13
Sartre, Existentialism, p.47f.

14

R.M. Hare, Freedom and Reason. Oxford: Clarendon, 1963. p.223.

15

Hare, Freedom, p.219

16

The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914. Toronto: Little Brown and Company, 1967. p.50 and p.229f. respectively.